

Cheats never prosper? Sport and morality in *Aeneid* 5

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For many people, watching or playing sport is mere entertainment, a pleasurable pastime that occupies our leisure time. But if we probe a little deeper, we can find deadly serious issues of morality and social values played out in this apparently innocent activity, and never more so than when accusations of cheating are being flung around. Do Sri Lankan bowlers ‘chuck’ the ball? Were World Cup referees instructed to let the South Koreans win? Closer to home, there is the case in the recent Winter Olympics of the Scottish skier Alain Baxter (the first Briton ever to win a medal for skiing), who was stripped of his bronze medal by the IOC disciplinary committee after he tested positive for drugs (methamphetamine, or ‘speed’). Outrage runs high over drugs and cheating, and equally over (what are perceived as) unfair accusations. Baxter (who claims he unwittingly ingested the drug by taking an American version of Vicks) was treated sympathetically by the British media. But isn’t it funny how the ‘cheats’ are always foreigners, and our guys are always ‘victims’ of the system? Could it be argued that ‘cheating’ in sport is simply a matter of your perspective on the events? Can a firm boundary be drawn between cheating and an acceptable desire to win at all costs?

The boundaries of acceptable sporting behaviour were already very much at issue in the ancient world, despite the gulfs of time and cultural difference between then and now. In the athletic games described by Virgil in *Aeneid* 5, Aeneas presides like a judge (or a Wimbledon umpire) over disputes between competitors. A first-glance reading of these games might suggest that Aeneas’ role is to defuse controversies with his authoritative judgements. But this raises a further question: do we agree with his decisions? Or do the pronouncements themselves, like a dodgy penalty award or lbw decision, provoke more debate about the situation?

Moral readings of *Aeneid* 5

Readers of the *Aeneid* have been struck by the overt moralism underlying the games in *Aeneid* 5. In the race between the ships, it is the moral qualities of the various captains that determine their fates. For example, one captain, Gyas, throws his helmsman overboard when he is too scared to steer close to the turning post. This action is described (in Day-Lewis’ translation) as ‘forgetting decorum, blind to his crew’s safety’; and later the ship is overtaken through lack of her proper helmsman. His quick temper has led directly to his defeat. Virgil also represents the captains as founders of famous Roman families. Another captain, Sergestus, is the founder of the Sergian family, of which the famous conspirator and terrorist Catiline was a member. In his rashness, he takes his ship too close to the rocks at the turning post and wrecks his ship (much as Catiline once threatened to wreck the ship of state).

But there are also figures who are presented in a more positive moral light. Mnesteus, the third captain, is the most skilled sailor, moving through from last place to challenge the leader. Virgil’s audience is behind him: the spectators all to a man cheered on the pursuer. But at the last minute, his competitor Cloanthus prays to the gods: and father Portunus himself pushed

the ship on its way with a huge hand, so that it sped to the shore swifter than wind of a flying arrow. Cloanthus wins the race through his *pietas* (piety, sense of duty to the gods); this quality of *pietas* has long been seen as a key quality in the *Aeneid*. Aeneas himself is often called *pious* (pious, dutiful) and the race seems to show that *pietas* is more important than sporting excellence. The sports historians of the early twentieth century found this result very disappointing: a travesty of sportsmanship, they fumed, unsporting in the extreme. There is no dispute over the result of this race, though, and Aeneas’ only intervention is to give a prize to ship-wrecked Sergestus, despite his failure to finish the course, because he managed to bring back his ship and his crew safely.

Nisus and Euryalus in *Aeneid* 5

Virgil’s second event, the running, has a far more dubious outcome. Two of the competitors (who later assume important roles in book 9: see Bob Cowan’s piece in this issue) are Nisus and Euryalus: Euryalus outstanding in beauty and bloom of youth, Nisus renowned for his pure love of his friend. Nisus is a brilliant runner and looks to be way ahead of his competitors; a certain Salius is in second place; Euryalus is in third place. Suddenly, though – on such moments of drama do sporting events turn – Nisus slips and falls. But though he is effectively out of the race, he keeps his wits about him:

*yet, even so, he remembered Euryalus, his dear friend;
he rose from the slippery mess, got in the way of Salius
and sent him spinning, tumbling down on the clotted earth.
Euryalus now darted by, and, thanks to his friend’s act,
ran in first, and flew on to wild cheering, a popular winner.*

Like a team-mate in a Formula One race, Nisus sacrifices his own chances to aid his friend – or, rather, by flooring a rival. Not unsurprisingly, Salius protests, but the audience is behind Euryalus: popular feeling sided with Euryalus – there was also his manly distress, and that worth which is made the more winning by good looks. Aeneas judges that the results should not be altered, but offers an extra prize to Salius to compensate him for his unfortunate loss. So far, perhaps, so good; but the controversy does not end here. Nisus, far from being ashamed at causing this dispute, has the gumption to demand that he too should be compensated:

*now Nisus remarked:— if you give such rewards to
losers and feel so
sorry for those who have come a cropper, what suitable
prize
have you got for me? After all, I’d have won the victor’s
crown
if I had not been baulked by the same bad luck as Salius.
While he was speaking, Nisus displayed his face and limbs
fouled with the slimy filth. Then good Aeneas laughed at
him
and ordering a shield to be brought (Didymaon’s work,
it had hung once by the gateway of Neptune’s temple
and been torn down by the Greeks) presented it to the
excellent youth, a prize of value.*

Why does Aeneas make this decision? It might be thought that he agrees with Nisus' version of events: although the narrator has told us that Nisus deliberately tripped Salius, he calls his own fall the same bad luck as Salius. Is Salius a victim of bad luck, or a victim of deliberate cheating? Euryalus clearly did not cheat himself, but is his victory valid if he won only through his friend's cheating? We might expect Aeneas to punish Nisus for his deliberate breaking of the rules of sport, but instead he rewards him. One way of understanding this is to see the prize as a reward for Nisus' *pietas* towards his friend. In his own moment of tragedy, he thinks of his friend and does something to help him. If we see *pietas* as the key to the *Aeneid* then this might explain what seems to be a radically different set of sporting values.

Is *pietas* always right?

There was, however, at least one ancient reader of the *Aeneid* who seems to challenge this reading, and indeed to challenge the morality of the games in *Aeneid* 5. About a hundred years after Virgil, the poet Statius also wrote a set of epic games in book 6 of his *Thebaid*. In them, he re-works Virgil's running race, with his own beautiful boy, his own dispute and his own judge. The situation and outcome, however, are very different. Statius' beautiful boy, Parthenopaeus, the equivalent of Euryalus, begins the race in the lead. However, as he approaches the finishing line, the second place runner grabs him by the hair and pulls himself into first place.

Parthenopaeus is a major hero in the poem; he also reappears to take a major role and die in book 9, just as Euryalus does in Virgil. He, too, has the audience on his side, and therefore seems to take on the role of Euryalus. But in this case, he is the one who has been unfairly deprived of victory by a cheat. By swapping the roles, Statius encourages the reader to sympathise with the loser not the winner. This has the effect of sending us back to rethink the *Aeneid* passage more critically. Was Aeneas right to leave the results as they stood, and to reward Nisus? Or should he have punished the cheat?

Why did Aeneas allow the result to stand? Statius implies an answer to this question, too. Aeneas backs the handsome and popular Euryalus ahead of the minor Salius; Statius' Parthenopaeus is, similarly, a crowd-pleaser. Does Statius' judge, Adrastus, back the glamorous figure? Or does he risk incurring the people's displeasure by backing the non-entity? Wisely, Adrastus takes neither course: he orders the race to be run again. In Statius' presentation of events, fairness takes precedence over the partisanship of the crowd; and, implicitly, Virgil's Aeneas is criticised for being too ready to please the mob.

This aspect of Statius' rewriting of the Virgilian games encourages another way of understanding Aeneas' decisions in the games, not using *pietas* as the key, but instead power. Aeneas' decisions show the generosity of a powerful ruler: he solves problems by providing extra prizes, by acting like a beneficent monarch. In particular, the way that he laughs at Nisus when he asks for a prize shows that he recognises the outrageousness of the demand and the arbitrariness of his own response to it. He takes account of popular feeling but the decision is his alone.

On this reading, then, there is no particular moral value to Aeneas' decisions. He does not follow a moral code, but his own preferences. The winner only wins because it is decreed thus, not because he particularly deserves to do so. Perhaps, then, we could re-evaluate the ship-race too: is a hefty shove from the hand of the sea-god Portunus any less an unnatural enhancement of performance than drug-taking in modern sport? Of course, Virgil (or Aeneas) might well have an argument to counter such accusations, to argue that the outcomes were indeed morally acceptable. But the central point is that decisions about cheating in sport are always a matter for debate: if you look at events from

a different angle (the angle of the loser, say, or – as with Statius – from a later period, when values have shifted) you will invariably come up with a different conclusion. The veneer of sporting fair play that covers any sporting event always conceals a more complex knot of moral issues, especially where cheating is at issue.

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For the Alain Baxter story, visit

http://news.bbc.co.uk/winterolympics2002/hi/english/alpine_skiing/newsid_1882000/1882870.stm

Discussions of the ethics of cheating:

<http://www.nascar.com/2002/news/headlines/wc/02/27/cheating/> (motorcar racing)

<http://msn.skysports.com/skysports/article/0,,9530-11052967,00.html> (Neil Back in the rugby European cup final)

A very useful introduction to Statius and an excellent bibliography including texts and translations can be found online at:

<http://home.att.net/~harald/abouts.htm>